

Sri Lankan police brutally attack thousands of protesting teachers

Our correspondents

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On Wednesday, Sri Lankan police viciously attacked a protest involving around 10,000 teachers outside the Fort Railway Station and adjacent roads in Colombo. Three teachers were hospitalised and others were injured in an assault involving water cannon and tear gas.

The police action, undoubtedly orchestrated at the highest levels of the state, is a sharp warning to workers and young people. The government is responding to massive social opposition with increasing repression.

The Colombo demonstration, demanding payment of a long outstanding salary increase, was part of a national sick leave action that day by about 250,000 educators, including teachers, principals and instructors. The government mobilised hundreds of police officers, riot police personnel and military forces, some armed with rifles, others with batons and tear gas, and stationed water-cannon vehicles nearby.

Wednesday's action was called by the Teachers and Principals Trade Union Alliance (TPTUA)—a collective of more than 20 teacher unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), Ceylon Teachers Services Union (CTSU)—controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—and the United Teacher Services Union, which is affiliated to the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party.

Thousands of educators, including from the North and East of the country, started gathering outside Fort Railway Station at 9 a.m., with their number growing for several hours. The police then arrived with an order from the Colombo Fort Magistrate's Court prohibiting the demonstration from moving along certain roads.

Demonstrators, however, defied the court directive and marched towards a nearby junction road which led to the finance ministry's head office. They chanted slogans such as, "Provide promotions in teacher and principal services," "Provide children school supplies at low prices," "Stop the privatisation of education" and "Solve the teacher-principal salary anomaly!"

Teachers also called for the defeat of the government's International Monetary Fund austerity measures.

Without warning, police started firing teargas and using water cannon. One teacher told the media that some 50 people were injured in the attack. The eye of one teacher and both eyes of another were wounded by high-pressure water cannon and they had to undergo surgery.

Faced with the rising anger of teachers and workers over the brutal assault, the trade unions called another day of national industrial action yesterday which saw total participation by education trade union members.

During Tuesday's demonstration, CTU and CTSU leaders, Joseph Stalin and Mahinda Jayasinghe respectively, and a few other union officials, met with finance ministry officials. They came away empty handed.

Stalin told the demonstrators that the discussions had achieved nothing. He then demagogically declared, "This struggle will end with the ouster of current President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government... How did Gotabhaya Rajapakse go home? It happened in a struggle that began with the teachers' struggle."

Stalin's comments were a reference to the April–July 2022 mass uprising that brought down former President Rajapakse and his government and the 100-day teachers' strike—from July to September 2021—to demand higher wages and the rectification of salary anomalies.

CTSU leader Jayasinghe told the demonstrators, "These problems will be solved by building a popular government." Both leaders were citing the upcoming presidential election scheduled for the end of September or early October.

To claim that teachers' demands will be resolved through the electoral defeat of Wickremesinghe is a treacherous attempt to politically derail rising working-class opposition to the government's IMF austerity attacks.

The JVP and its affiliated trade unions are desperately promoting this propaganda. CSTU leader Jayasinghe is a JVP central committee member. But all the opposition parliamentary parties, including the Samagi Jana

Balawegaya (SJB), the JVP and its Jathika Jana Balawegaya electoral front, are fully committed to the IMF's program.

The line that all will be solved by the election also gives the government and the state the breathing space they require to intensify their repressive measures.

The scale of the austerity measures demanded by the IMF are incompatible with democracy. While brazen police attacks are perpetrated against educators in public, there can be no doubt that discussions are underway behind closed doors for even more serious authoritarian measures.

Stalin's account was based on a complete falsification of recent history. In fact the teachers' national strike in 2021 was betrayed by the unions following meetings with Mahinda Rajapakse, then prime minister. Union officials endorsed the government's claim that teachers' salaries could not be increased because of Sri Lanka's deepening economic crisis. They then accepted a deal for just one-third of the teachers' salary demand and false promises that the remainder would be paid in two instalments, the first in January 2022 and the rest in 2023.

Teachers' union officials attempted to justify their sellout, claiming that they had achieved "some kind of a victory." Payment of the outstanding two-thirds of the salary increase, of course, was denied by the government as the economic crisis deepened, following the eruption of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Teachers and all sections of the Sri Lankan working class and poor have been hit by skyrocketing increases in the cost of food, power and other essentials, as well as vicious government attacks on their social conditions. The brutal imposition of IMF dictates by the Wickremesinghe government has devastated the lives of millions of Sri Lankans.

Like their counterparts in other sectors, since 2022 the teacher union leadership has responded to these social assaults with intermittent, limited and isolated protests, all designed to dissipate their members' rising anger.

Since January, trade union officials have called strikes and protests in the electricity, health, university, port, postal and education sectors demanding higher pay and opposing privatisation. The union bureaucracies, however, are vehemently opposed to unified national action.

Yesterday, President Wickremesinghe, in a clear reference to the teachers' protests and the ongoing non-academic university workers' strike, repeated that his government would not grant any wage increase for public sector employees. It may be considered next year, he said, but this depended on whether the government could manage expenditure—i.e., through even bigger tax increases and social spending cuts.

The government is already squeezing workers and the poor through increases in the value added tax on all essentials, higher prices for goods and services, and the restructuring of state-owned enterprises for privatisation and commercialisation. The harsh attacks are principally designed to repay foreign debt.

The government's vicious police attack on protesting teachers and its repeated declarations that there will be no pay rises this year for public sector workers, make clear that the entire working class is in a political struggle against the Wickremesinghe administration and the profit system itself.

World Socialist Web Site supporters intervened in the teachers' protest on Wednesday, and in school districts outside Colombo, distributing copies in Sinhala and Tamil of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) statement, "Oppose Sri Lankan trade unions' attempt to subordinate class struggles to upcoming elections! Prepare a general strike against government austerity! Fight for socialist policies!"

The statement called for workers to form democratically elected action committees in workplaces, factories and plantations, independent of the trade union bureaucracies and the capitalist political parties to which they are aligned, to prepare a political general strike. That is the only way to defeat the austerity offensive, secure the social needs of the masses and prevent the imposition of openly authoritarian forms of rule.

The statement explained: "For the success of a political general strike, it is essential to go forward and build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses (DSC) comprised of democratically elected delegates from action committees throughout the island. The SEP initiated this program in mid-July 2022, during the mass uprising, to counter the capitalist onslaught.

"Workers do not need a capitalist government of the ruling parties or the opposition SJB, JVP, or any other political combination, that will continue to implement IMF austerity. They need a workers' and peasants' government that will implement a socialist program. The DSC would prepare and mobilise the revolutionary power of the working class to overthrow the capitalist state and pave the way for a workers' and peasants' government."



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